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Geographically, R.I. Teachers are Among the Best

Chester Smolski

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COMMENTARY/ **Chester E. Smolski**

Geographically, R.I. teachers are among the best



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Isn't it time that we recognize the good teachers and good work being done in the schools of this state rather than constantly harping on problems with education and how our students don't measure up to those in other countries?

Over the past three years, working with Dr. Anne K. Petry, Professor of Education at Rhode Island College with a grant from the National Geographic Society, I have had the opportunity to work with teachers from throughout the state, at all levels from kindergarten through Grade 12. I have been most impressed with the creativity, conscientiousness, dedication, commitment and plain hard work that these teachers have exhibited in this program.

Our grant, which has brought \$130,000 into the state from the Geographic and which has been matched by another \$130,000 of funds from foundations, state government and local sources, has made it possible to help many teachers learn about the new geography in today's world. The additional approximately \$100,000 of maps, globes, textbooks, atlases and teaching materials contributed by the Geographic which have found their way into the classrooms of the state, has provided more help and encouragement for teachers than some have experienced in decades of inadequate funding for teacher help.

Through this program 75 teachers, so far, from 26 school districts in the state have been trained in Rhode Island or at the Geographic in Washington, DC. These Teacher Consultants go out and give workshops to other teachers to help them experience the same excitement that this new interactive geography has given them. These teachers then bring it to the children in their classes.

Probably one of the most satisfying experiences generated by the program is the increased professionalism and empowerment of these teacher consultants. Whether this be through giving presentations at regional, national or international meetings (in most cases, something they had never done) or writing and receiving grants (again, something they have never done), these reinvigorated masters of instruction are doing themselves and their school districts proud.

Consider, for example, some of the accomplishments of these 75 Teacher Consultants just over this past year: one received one of the five \$25,000 Milken Awards given in the state and another received one of the five national Cram Map Awards for all expenses to a national meeting at which she made a presentation. In addition this latter teacher received a \$1,200 award from the Geographic, a \$300 award from the Rhode Island Committee on the Humanities and a \$20,000 award from the Champlin Foundation, all of these for her classes and school district (before this program, this teacher of 25 years had never received an award). She has also been selected to teach teachers from throughout the country for the Geographic in Washington for four weeks this summer.

Further, another one received a \$20,000 Champlin award (her second); five teacher consultants were selected to work in St. Louis on national testing standards; one was selected to

work in Washington, DC for follow up work on standards; one went to Japan for two weeks of study; five were selected to study at Smith College; one received a sabbatical to give workshops throughout the state this spring; eight taught in the summer in our program; one received a major grant from the Department of Education while three others received small grants in their school districts; one received her PhD; two attended a two-week wilderness field camp with the Geographic in Oregon and conducted a major and successful week of wilderness study in the state for Geography Awareness Week; two attended a four-week Leadership Institute in Washington, DC with teachers from throughout the country; and seven gave presentations at regional and national meetings.

In addition to these special activities and awards are the numerous after school meetings, the all-day Saturday meetings that we conduct and the semi-annual newsletter and quarterly brief that are now put together by the teachers, all on a voluntary basis.

These Teacher Consultants are now part of a national endeavor into which the National Geographic Society has pumped \$80 million over the past eight years to improve the teaching of geography in the schools of the nation. Each

state now has an Alliance, similar to our own Rhode Island Geography Education Alliance, and the work accomplished by these teachers has been truly astounding, with Rhode Island teachers among the leaders.

But try to tell someone about the great things happening with geography in our schools here in Rhode Island. The statewide television people are not interested because it isn't controversial; the newspapers don't have a comprehensive education page; and radio is apparently reserved for talk shows that cut up people rather than pat persons on the back.

I cannot speak for other aspects of the educational picture, but I do know that here in Rhode Island our teachers are doing some of the most exciting work in geography to be found anywhere in the country. Given the resources (teachers still buy their own supplies in many cases); given some encouragement and recognition (one school committee did not even acknowledge or congratulate its own Milken awardee); and given direction, as our program does, there is no limit as to how high our Rhode Island teachers will go.

Chester E. Smolski is director of urban studies and professor of geography at Rhode Island College. His column appears monthly.